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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000719

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS, INR, AND DRL - JANE KIM

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KISM](#) [KDEM](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS, RACIAL POLITICS MARK RUN-UP TO CRITICAL
BY-ELECTION

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 365 - CATHOLIC CHURCH CHALLENGES BAN

Classified By: Classified By: Acting Political Section Chief William G.
Gray for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

11. (C) Summary. The ruling National Front (BN) coalition is gearing up to oppose Anwar Ibrahim's return to parliament via an August 26 by-election. BN tactics include intense rhetoric with religious and racial connotations. A Malaysian Bar Council forum on conversion to Islam was shut down by a group of Muslim protesters spanning the political spectrum, a development that has provided the BN and government-controlled media with opportunities to rouse the emotions of their Muslim/Malay base. In the meantime, the Government has again threatened to shut down a Catholic newspaper for "dabbling in politics." Government and BN spokesmen continue to label Anwar an "American stooge" and accuse the USG of "meddling" in the internal affairs of Malaysia. Post expects the rhetoric to continue to intensify with both sides viewing the by-election as part of the zero-sum power struggle between UMNO and Anwar. End Summary.

Protesters Block Forum

12. (SBU) The Malaysian Bar Council attempted to hold a forum, entitled "Conversion to Islam," at their national headquarters on August 9. Included in the forum was a panel discussion of two high profile conversion cases involving the difficulties faced by non-Muslims in conversion cases related to religiously mixed marriages. A hostile crowd of about 500 protesters assembled in front of the building, including representatives from the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), Anwar Ibrahim's People Justice Party (PKR) (including a Member of Parliament), the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), and Muslim-based NGOs. A group of protesters led by Peninsular Malay Students Federations (GPMS) Vice-president Jais Abdul Karim and PKR MP Zulkifli Noordin stormed the building shortly after the forum began. Police at the scene made no attempt to stop the protesters, but actually escorted them inside, where the demonstrators disrupted the proceedings, using racial epithets and other derogatory language and forcing Bar Council President Ambiga Sreenevasan to close the forum. Police did not make any arrests of the protestors, but have announced that they are investigating the forum's organizers.

13. (SBU) Criticism of the forum has crossed political lines and split both the opposition and ruling alliances. On August 8, de facto Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, taking a position similar to that of Deputy Prime Minister Najib, said that such forums should be held behind closed doors and not openly. However, PKR Deputy President Syed Husin Ali condemned the group that entered the Bar Council, including PKR MP Zulkifli. Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi said he hoped such forums would not be organized in the future, explaining, "issues concerning religion are very sensitive"

and since matters on religion "are spelt out," there was no need for discussions. Abdullah added that he would leave it up to the Home Ministry to decide whether action, including using the Internal Security Act (ISA) and Sedition Act, might be taken against the Bar Council.

14. (SBU) Syed Hamid, Home Minister, said he "hoped that the Bar council got the message that there are certain things that are out of bounds for public discussion, even if held in a private place." DPM Najib dismissed the protesters' disruption, saying it was "expected" and blamed the disruption on the Bar Council for its "stubborn" insistence on holding the forum. De facto Religious Affairs Minister Ahmad Zahid encouraged authorities to take action against the Bar Council for its "defiance" by proceeding with the forum. He claimed the forum had a "hidden agenda to disparage Islam." While UMNO leaders have united in criticizing the Bar Council, the non-Malay parties of the BN, including Gerakan and MCA, have emphasized the need to address the problems the Bar Council was attempting to discuss.

Catholic Herald Under Renewed Pressure

15. (SBU) GOM has renewed its pressure on the Catholic weekly newsletter Herald for allegedly "dabbling" in politics (reftel). The Home Affairs had issued a show-cause letter on July 16 accusing the paper of committing two offenses - not focusing on religion and religious activities, and carrying an article purportedly degrading Islam. The division issued another warning on August 12 that Herald's permit will be

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suspended if it goes ahead with a planned editorial on the Permatang Pauh by-election in its forthcoming issue. The Herald has a circulation of 12, 0000 and carries reports in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil and Chinese. Editor Father Lawrence Lim denied that the publication had breached permit conditions. In his reply to the Home Affairs Ministry, Father Lim stated that the Ministry had not defined the concept of "religion" in the application form for a publishing permit and neither is there a definition in the Constitution. Father Lim pointed out that the forthcoming editorial was only asking people to pray for a just and fair by-election.

Anwar Portrayed as U.S. Puppet

16. (SBU) The GOM is continuing its fierce rhetoric on Anwar Ibrahim, describing him as an American lackey. Foreign Minister Rais Yatim fired the first salvo by stating that the USG should not meddle in Malaysia's internal affairs, arguing that even the UN secretary-general has not said anything about how Malaysia is handling its legal matters. The press has quoted Rais as saying that he planned to write a letter to the UNSYG Ban complaining about U.S. "meddling. Rais has maintained that the official U.S. stance as well as statements by former Vice President Gore and former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor violated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Charter. Echoing the foreign minister's view, UMNO Youth Internal Bureau Chairman and former PM Mahathir's son Mukhriz Mahathir described Anwar as a political puppet of the United States government. He added that the statements by the USG and its former leaders are "a concerted conspiracy to install their lackey in Malaysia." The UMNO-owned Malay newspapers have also prominently editorialized on allegedly close links between the U.S. and Anwar.

The Next Steps

17. (SBU) Anwar and BN continue to prepare to submit their by-election nominations on August 16 while his lawyers,

confident they have a very strong case, prepare for the next stage of the legal process, which resumes on September 10. Anwar is expected to make appearances at a series of political rallies leading up to election day. Although BN publicly talks about defeating Anwar, privately they concede his likely victory and seek to make the margin as small as possible. Poloffs will monitor the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party Congress on August 15 in the Opposition controlled state of Perak as well as the by-election on August 26.

Comment

18. (C) The response to the Bar Council forum has illustrated the Government's willingness to utilize religious sensitivities and tensions for political gains. The involvement of party members from PAS and PKR show the fragile nature of the Opposition's coalition and the potential for UMNO strategists to continue exploiting the coalition's lack of cohesiveness, especially along religious and racial lines. The Malay language press on August 13 gave prominent and sympathetic coverage to a demonstration by thousands of students at the exclusively Malay Mara Technical University against a proposal by the new PKR-controlled Selangor state government to "integrate" the university by allotting 10 percent of the places for non-Malays. As the by-election draws near, BN will likely increase the rhetoric, including implications that Malays' preferred status will disappear if Anwar and the opposition seize control of the government. The message emerging in the Government-controlled media is that Anwar represents increased instability and a loss of sovereignty to the West, particularly the United States. While fierce, religious and ethnic-tinged rhetoric is not unusual in Malaysian politics, the intensity of the current campaign likely reflects the views of the major players that the Opposition/BN power struggle is a zero-sum game. Anwar believes he must become prime minister or go to jail over the politically-motivated sodomy charges and top UMNO leaders fear political defeat would mean loss of their positions of privilege and in some cases even result in exposure to possible criminal charges for graft and corruption.

KEITH